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## Jimin Lee's Recent Works - Travelling Icons?

'How ludicrous were all attempts at defining the self' (Krys Lee, 2012, *Drifting House*).

"You can resume your flight whenever you like," they said to me, "but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude, which does not begin, and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes" (Italo Calvino, 1979, *Invisible Cities*).

Previous writers on Jimin Lee's work have commented on the change that has occurred in the artist's thematic focus and imagery over the last years. If her earlier work often homed in on domestic objects, such as a food blender or showerhead, or items with a direct proximity to the female body, such as curlers and briefs, Lee has recently extended her spatial scope and references. While still carrying the air of the everyday, the banal even, spaces and objects linked to transport, to mobility have become prominent in her work. When the decorative patterns of her earlier work reappear, as in the semi-abstract series *Fabricated Land*, they do so in form of a literal overlay onto a far-reaching frame of reference, namely maps and geographical formations. In this respect, Lee's series *Seconding the Motion* of 2007, six photogravures showing fragments of a female inside a car from multiple viewpoints, acts as an important lynchpin. One important focus here is the thrilling spatial acrobatics that the camera permits, the other is the motif of the car. This represents a vital move out of the domestic sphere. Moreover, flashes of the navigated terrain, doubly framed by the car window and the camera viewfinder, open out into the external world. As viewers we participate in the sense of exhilaration or even freedom that driving can represent, especially for women.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the disjointed, dizzying imagery transmits an aspect of driving that promotes engagement with a world beyond. As Iain Borden has argued, 'driving can shock us out of our normal, unthinking and disconnected relationship with our surroundings, and instead inculcate a purely sensory encounter with the world around us' (p. 71).

To the artist it is important that the images are photographed by her, rather than, as is so often the case in contemporary art, being appropriated from somewhere or someone. The photographs that form the basis of all of Lee's work often originate close to her home in Oakland, California. This is far from evident to a viewer not

familiar with the area. Hence, the imagery in most of the current work, of spaces of transport, like airports or train stations, or objects *for* transport, such as planes and trains, could be taken almost anywhere in the world today.

One interpretation of the earlier work with its references to an (albeit not personalised) home environment is to read it in terms of the emotional labour that is necessary for anyone, as with Lee, making their second home in a different culture. The work in this exhibition shows an artist confident in taking her place in a globalised environment and reflecting on the bigger issues that this entails.

‘If we think space relationally, then it is no more than the sum of all those relations, engagements, interactions that encircle the globe. It is utterly everyday and grounded and it may go round the world. It is everywhere local but altogether global’ (Massey, quoted in Meskimmon and Rowe, 2013, p. 96). In this regard, Lee’s ‘local’ sources are indicative of global economic, social, cultural and aesthetic concerns and connections.

### *Fabricated Land*

This wider perspective does not cancel out all references to the personal. The sensuous close-ups of patterns of dots, stripes, animal prints, generic flowers and lace in *Fabricated Land* hint at bodily presence. Still, the all-over, decontextualized, abstract quality of the configurations neutralises and turns them into a decorative pictorial motif, affective, but impersonal. Moreover, the fabricated designs almost, if not fully, hide underlying imagery with altogether different associations: maps or man-made landscapes, evident in the structural forms that are just visible underneath the decorative ‘surface’.

If we choose to regard the series in more personal, though not biographical terms, we may ask whether the patterns with their rhythmic repeats fulfil a camouflaging role. Do they disguise the uncertainties, even threats, as well as the lure and possibilities of an external world? Or do they perhaps function as a safeguard, as a ritualistic token against a bodily or geographical ‘other’? In that respect, the square format of the pieces could imply a sense of protective containment. Lee has mentioned the importance of the idea of ‘containers’ for her, a theme to which I will return later.

In these pieces Lee also wittily alerts us to the pervasiveness of systems of production, or of capitalism's interpenetration of both human relations and what may have been once considered the 'natural' world. A further extension of this idea is Maurizio Lazzarato's (1996) concept of 'immaterial labour'. This term captures 'the 'informational' and 'cultural' content of commodities under current conditions of capitalism as opposed to earlier analyses which associated commodities only with the area of production. As Anna Dezeuze (2009) has said: 'Economic value in today's capitalism is generated by communication and the consumption of signs as much as the exchange of goods and services' (p. 402). In Lee's series the signs are ordinary and frequently overlooked everyday patterns and architectural or mapping designs.

Many of the latest works could be read in the more general terms of movement, location, the near and the far, as described above.

### *Lake Merritt*

The almost abstract new diptych series titled *Lake Merritt* intermeshes the organic, 'natural' whirls of smoothly flowing or foaming water with such obviously man-made or, more precisely, technically generated, ubiquitous graphic forms, such as digital rasters of dots and vertical or horizontal lines. These are familiar from masking parts of images in the public domain or, alternatively, from technical faults or disturbances. It is no surprise then, for someone unfamiliar with the precise location of the eponymous lake of the title, to learn that this is, indeed, an *artificial* lake in Oakland.

The shape-shifting character of the *Lake Merritt* images – no image allows a precise focus or a sense of location - is intensified through the doubling of the diptych format. The series continues the theme of mobility, of constant motion. It does so not necessarily in a comfortable manner. The particular quality of the various rasters operates as a mask, intimating something that is always out of reach or beyond visibility, hence the unsettling character of the images. This feature, more so than the sight of water in motion, also prevents the images from ever appearing static. They are therefore poetically, quietly disquietening to behold.

### *Turbo Crossings*

The magnificent diptych titled *Turbo Crossings* (2012) shows an isolated airplane engine against a white, cloud-mottled background on the right. Its exact reverse mirror image on the left is set against a softer background of similar forms, tinted blue, and hence suggestive of water or air. But the viewer cannot be certain which is which. The bulbous, Rohrschach-like engine shapes are bathed in glorious azure blue with a white rim at the front of the 'engine'. Each of the metallic formations reflects the light in a slightly different manner, bright and shiny on the left against the blue background, rich and dark on the right against the whitish background. As with the *Lake Merritt* series (but for different reasons), the viewer is at a loss as to the location of the object in relation to its space. On a mundane level, the single image could be read as a view from an airplane window onto the engine, unencumbered by the familiar porthole window frame. However, jointly the two images assume a perplexing, almost hallucinatory appeal. Their stillness is reminiscent of the curious sensation we have when flying at almost the speed of sound yet appear to be standing still.

In their doubling the two shapes form an emblematic figure. Its fullness recalls a female body. An association that is countered or neutralised by the metallic non-organic colours. Or is it? The figure of the 'cyborg', of human-machine fusion, has been regarded as one means to undermine conventional gender binaries in Donna Haraway's (1985) well-known thesis. Thus, the diptych could be comprehended as pointing to another type of mobility, that of the 'unfixing' of identities, gender- or otherwise. In any case, the title *Turbo Crossings* implies the dynamism of mobility, of manifold passages and routes between numerous places and states, pointing in opposite directions, while umbilically interconnected. If we relate the images directly to space, the following quote alerts us to both the networks of possible relations - and the potential failure of their materialisation:

'... there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction – or not – potential links that may never be established. Space then, sensed in this way, is not a completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, in which every place is already linked to everywhere else. ... There are always loose ends' (Massey, 2003, in Groom, 2013, p. 122).

The diptych encompasses such contrasting ideas and the openness to success or failure.

Historically, one of the earliest manifestations of a diptych in Western art was a devotional image consisting of two hinged wooden panels that were foldable. In this way, both were protected during travel, only to be opened out on arrival at one's destination for contemplation, in other words, ready for everyday use. Such diptychs were called 'travelling icons' (Collins, n.d.). It strikes me that one aspect of Lee's work fulfils the role of contemporary 'travelling icons'.

The artist's new prints show the industrial or urbanised landscape, or, in Marc Augé's much-quoted term, the 'non-spaces' of contemporary globalism such as airports. These images, based on photographs, do not aim to be documentary. They are also deliberately not artful in the tradition of art photography. They could be snapshots, except they do not fall into the ever-changing range of subjects that make up the genre. They may look unintended and arbitrary but, at the same time, appear monumental and meaningful. There are no humans in them despite the fact that what we see are working environments rather than the typical spaces of the traveller or tourist. Ostensibly, the scenes do not imply the presence of a spectator. They often present an elevated viewpoint. Artist and critic Hito Steyerl (2011) has highlighted the prevalence of this image-phenomenon in contemporary culture at large and observes its implications: 'Our sense of spatial and temporal orientation has changed dramatically in recent years, prompted by new technologies of surveillance, tracking and targeting. One of the symptoms of this transformation is the growing importance of aerial views: overviews, Google Map views, satellite views' (quoted in Groom, 2013, p 169). Concurrently Steyerl notes the disturbance of the centuries-old convention of linear perspective with its affiliation to linear time. Instead, new technologies, pre-figured by montage, allow for the creation of 'multifocal and non-linear imagery' (p. 170). Lee's works in this exhibition demonstrate both of these changing image conventions.

### *Bon Voyage*

In conversation Lee has mentioned the importance of the idea of the container for her. Aeroplanes, trains, cars can all be regarded as containers for movement. On the one hand, there is the freedom and protection that such containers afford, on the

other, used in military or medical speech, the word can assume less benign associations. Both the verb 'to contain' and the noun 'containment' can imply a holding in or holding back in the sense of controlling or restraining.

The literal depiction of several stacked rows of internationally standardised steel boxes also known as freight or shipping containers in *Bon Voyage* - an apparently endless array stretching way beyond the picture frame - seems to imply these two contradictory associations. In addition to free travel and interchange this imagery signifies another, public, if not necessarily visible type of motion. It is the traffic of international capital in the shape of the circulation of billions of goods across the globe. The two square end-panels of such containers are repeatedly depicted in each of the images. One print displays the 'front' – a graphic treasure trove inscribed with both standardised manufacturing information as well as more specific acronyms indicating destination or origin and other arcane matters of international transport<sup>2</sup>. The other print brandishes the opposite, more 'anonymous' rear-side of a multitude of containers, revealing the bare, although surprisingly diverse, vertically slatted designs with only the occasional brand name or shipping number disclosed. The sheer inconspicuousness and blandness of the source imagery calls to mind the movement of the unnamed masses of globalised labour that generate the interchange of goods in the first place. Not only does the actual labour that creates our product-saturated environment remain hidden, the people who are the originators of this labour stay invisible too. The title *Bon Voyage* takes on an ominous air.

Lee's themes of mobility and labour, of the more personal as well as the social kind, also function at the level of the media she employs. While examining and destabilising the photographic image, Lee uses various print processes, some of which, particularly the laser-cut wood block, constitute a new departure not just for the artist, but also for the field of printmaking at large. This has involved the artist in cutting-edge investigative experimentation, the development of new routes to follow.

Moreover, printmaking encompasses, like no other medium, both some of the most advanced technologies of our time while also retaining the ethos and practices of a craft, the involvement of the artist's hand. For example, Lee's new laser-cut wood block prints, such as *Passing Through*, entail several layers comprising of different

blocks as well as inkjet printing. At each stage complex procedures and decisions require the full gamut of the artist's long-honed expertise as well as experimentation, intuition and creative conjecture. The final print therefore exhibits a literal and metaphorical condensation of labour: conceptual, affective, technical and hands-on. In the aesthetisation of seemingly unremarkable photographic imagery through the labour-intensive processes of printmaking the usually unseen and concealed is brought to the viewer's attention.

### Travelling concepts?

Lee has shied away from being identified with Asian-American art and artists, as debated since the 1990s. She is wary of such labels that can delimit and falsely frame an artist's work. In her 2012 book on female Korean artists, art historian Jin Whui-yeon similarly questions the still prevalent critical and frequent curatorial approach that refers to national identity 'as the foundation of artistic identity' (p. 12). Instead, she argues that artists of the younger generation are 'eclectic nomads' for whom the 'diasporic life' is 'the norm'.<sup>3</sup> While this may be an exaggeration as regards the majority of younger Korean artists, it certainly applies to Lee.

Nevertheless, following Whui-yeon (2012), I would like to refer to Korean artist Yang Haegue's trademark use of blinds, to highlight aspects of Lee's work that may be linked to a non-Western outlook. According to the author, there is something in Yang Haegue's work 'that stimulates the collective memory of Koreans' (p. 57).<sup>4</sup> The partitions are reminiscent of 'traditional hanging [Korean] screens'.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, these 'both distribute and block the circulation of light, warmth, wind, humidity, air and scents'. They 'divide the space but only partially' (p. 58). Hence, Whui-yeon (2012) takes the screen as a metaphor for a non-Western, Korean attitude.<sup>6</sup> It allows 'the co-existence of division and reliance, separation and unity' (p. 58) rather than demanding the 'clear categorizations' of the West (p. 157). It is a stance that ultimately challenges (Western) notions of boundaries and borders and permits the 'co-existence of opposites, duality of acceptance co-existing without contradiction (p. 156).<sup>7</sup>

Such an outlook may prove to be ever more important, if we consider present challenges as signalled by Lee's work. Hito Steyerl has urged: 'Many contemporary philosophers have pointed out that the present moment is distinguished by a



prevailing condition of groundlessness. We cannot assume any stable ground on which to base metaphysical claims or foundational political myths. At best, we are faced with temporary, contingent, and partial attempts at grounding. But if there is no stable ground available for our social lives and philosophical aspirations, the consequence must be a permanent, or at least intermittent state of free fall for subjects and objects alike. But why don't we notice?' (p.168)

Jimin Lee is an artist who notices and shows. In this way, she asks us as viewers to notice too.

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<sup>1</sup> As Iain Borden (2013), in his book *Drive. Journeys through Film, Cities and Landscapes*, remarks of the relationship between women and cars: 'It is not the consumption of automobiles as objects but ... the correlation of the actual act of driving with the capacity for autonomy and self-direction that is most important here (p. 25). This relationship is reinforced and promoted by the movies – a fact that may account for the cinematic character of Lee's series.

<sup>2</sup> Unbeknownst to her when taking the picture, Lee discovered, on close inspection of the images while working on them, that there were indeed references to her home country.

<sup>3</sup> It must be remembered that migration or a diasporic life is a reality today for others than the international elites or, at the opposite spectrum, the millions of displaced or economically disadvantaged. Despite this, much critical writing in social and cultural theory has tended to focus on either or both of these (albeit for valid reasons). Michael Peter Smith's and Adrian Favell's (2006) book aims to draw a more differentiated picture by paying attention to 'the many worlds of international highly skilled, educated or professional migration' (p. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Critics from the West have tended to interpret Yang Haegue's characteristic deployment of blinds 'as a method to understand the senses and space in relation with op art or the colors of abstract expressionism' (Whui-yeon, 2012, p. 57).

<sup>5</sup> These screens are 'made from bamboo strips or reeds' that are 'hung from window frames or cross-beams of traditional wooden houses'. They are similar to Western, so-called Venetian blinds 'in size, function and shape' (Whui-yeon, 2012, p. 57).

<sup>6</sup> She considers the mulberry paper-covered doors, or semi-transparent screens, used historically in Korean houses in a similar fashion.

<sup>7</sup> The author introduces the term 'simultaneous transboundary' in order 'to overcome Western epistemological premises on "hard-to-define" categories' (p. 157) and to avoid the typical Western 'simultaneity of differences based on the premise of contradiction' (p. 156). She convincingly points out that even post-structuralist critiques of Western epistemological premises 'start out from an emphasis on boundary and category' (Whui-yeon, 2012, p. 157).